

# 95 Tips for Brilliant Business Writing

compiled by

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# 95 Tips for Brilliant Business Writing

## 1. Preparation, preparation, preparation

To avoid poorly written documents ask the following questions before beginning:

- Who will read this letter?
- What do I want to achieve?
- What information does the reader need?
- Why do they need it?
- What do they already know about the subject?

## 2. Know your topic

Before you write your first word, make sure you have done your homework. Find out everything you need to know before you begin. Why? So that you don't get part way through your document only to uncover a piece of vital information that renders what you've already written obsolete. Doing your research before you start will save you time, energy and effort.

## 3. Goal-setting

Know what you want to achieve before beginning to write. Your piece may have more than one goal. Writing them down ensures you achieve all your writing goals.

## 4. Audience is king (or queen)

Before you begin, think about your readers. What do you know about them – age, gender, interests, relationship to you and your firm. Put yourself in their shoes and think about what it would be like to receive a communication from you. If you spend time on this when you start to write, you will be more empathetic with your readers and it will show in your writing.

## 5. Good writing style

There are several elements to good writing style. They are:

- Giving a positive message
- Showing familiarity with the subject
- Relating the right information in a concise, friendly manner
- Having a call to action.

## 6. The right style for the right message

Use the right style for the right form of message. These are:

**Emails:** Brevity. Remove any words which are not absolutely necessary while keeping your tone warm and friendly.

**Websites:** Gain your visitors' attention and interest through words, not gimmicks. On the net, people are searching for information so provide it in a way that hooks them into your copy and keeps them reading. Underestimating the importance of well-written web copy is a mistake made by too many companies.

**Letters:** Formality. The most common way to conduct informal conversations is now by email, so letters have been relegated to more formal occasions. Your writing should reflect this.

**Faxes:** Despite email, the fax remains an important channel of communication. It is less formal than a letter, but more formal than an email. Faxes should be short and to the point.

## 7. The underlying psychology

Understanding the psychology of the written word and its effect on readers will help you achieve the results you want. For example, effective business writing grabs the reader's attention and galvanises them into reading your document. Weak, poorly constructed writing will have the opposite effect and, no matter what type of communication you're writing, if people don't read it, you have failed.

## 8. Writing steps

To write well you must do three things:

- *Prewrite* – write down your goals, make notes of items which must be included in your text, think about your audience before beginning.
- *Write* – get those words down on paper!
- *Review* – check for errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation and meaning.

Cutting corners will result in an inferior job.

## 9. Styles

Which of the following best characterises your writing?

### Negative

Abrupt	<i>If you cannot handle the project ...</i>
Unhelpful	<i>We are not able to assist you ...</i>
Pompous	<i>I have worked on many jobs like this ...</i>
Undermining	<i>I am not sure you can do this job ...</i>
Authoritarian	<i>You must complete this job now ...</i>

### Positive

Democratic	<i>When you have time, could you ...</i>
Co-operative	<i>We are willing to look at ...</i>
Supportive	<i>I think you are doing this job well ...</i>
Unassuming	<i>I will do my best on this job ...</i>
Persuasive	<i>I really think this is your project to manage ...</i>

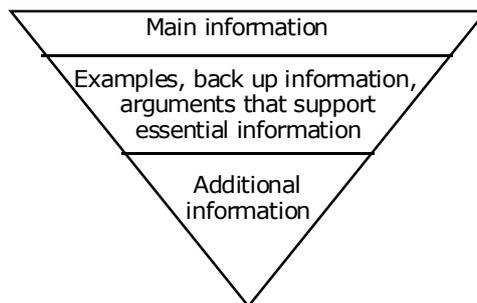
## 10. Positivity inspires

An abrupt or unhelpful email or letter will not inspire the reader to respond as positively as they would if they received a friendly message. They are likely to mirror your communication and respond just as abruptly or unhelpfully.

## 11. Information organisation

Organise your material by its importance: the most essential first (that which answers the who, what, where and how questions).

Follow this up with the why and supporting information so that your information pyramid looks like this:



## 12. Writing back to front?

Many business communications have the most important nugget of information buried at the end. It should be at the beginning. This can happen when a writer hasn't planned the communication and it ends up a written chronology of their thought process. Your work will often read better if the order of the first and last paragraphs is reversed.

## 13. Express rather than impress

The belief that a simple style reflects a simple mind is untrue. In fact, a simple style is the result of hard work and hard thinking. A muddy style reflects muddy thinking.

## 14. Keep it short

Be succinct. Delete unnecessary words. Sentences should be no more than 25 words wherever possible. Shorter is better.

## 15. One idea per paragraph

Keep paragraphs short and easy to read. Two sentences is perfect.

## 16. Use words your reader will understand

Don't use jargon or technical words unless you know your audience will understand them. Don't use multi-syllable words where a simple one will do instead. Your aim is to be understood not to win a literary prize.

## 17. Spell checker

Many words with different meanings are spelled the same. The only foolproof method is the dictionary. Free versions are available online ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)) if you don't have one at your desk.

## 18. Abbreviations and acronyms

Overuse of abbreviations clutters your copy, making it look untidy and hard to read. If you must use abbreviations, always write them out in full the first time you use them. Eg Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Thereafter, use the shortened form (MADD).

## 19. Consistency is key

Whether it is dates, numbers or bulleted lists – be consistent throughout your document. Consistency mistakes most often occur in bulleted lists:

*My strengths include:*

- *Being tidy*
- *Writing well*
- *Punctuality*

In this example, *being* and *writing* are verbs; *punctuality* is a noun.

## 20. Numbers

Write the numbers from one to ten as words; write numbers higher than ten as digits (eg 22). **Warning: This is just a general guide, there will be exceptions.** Do not start a sentence with a number. If, however, you have no choice, the number should be written out in words. If your number has many zeros (eg 20,000,000), it will be easier for your reader to understand if you write *20 million*.

## 21. Dates

There are a number of ways to write dates but whichever choice you make, write them the same way all through your document.

Your best choices are:

*December 7, 2009*

*7 December 2009* (note, no comma after December)

Separating the day from the year (as in the second example) is less confusing. Adding a suffix to a date is both confusing and difficult to read. It is also unnecessary. Eg *7<sup>th</sup> December 2009* or *December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009*.

## 22. Company names

A company or organisation is a single entity and therefore carries a singular verb.

*Auckland City Council is increasing its rates.*

Even when a company's name ends in "s", it is still singular.

*Hallensteins is holding its annual sale.*

Do not mix up the singular and plural in the same sentence.

*Hallensteins is holding their annual sale.*

## 23. Sexist language

It is not appropriate to use the male pronoun "he" when your subject could be female.

*Put yourself in your prospect's shoes and consider whether he would like the language you use.*

Where possible rewrite your sentence so that you do not exclude anyone.

*Put yourself in your prospect's shoes and consider the best language to use.*

## 24. Clarity

There is no room for obscurity in business writing. If your reader does not understand your message mistakes are likely and money possibly lost.

*Check sections B and C for errors.*

means something quite different to

*Sections B and C should be checked for errors.*

In the second example it is unclear who should be checking. Clarity is often lost when sentences become long. Break long sentences into shorter ones to solve this problem.

## **25. Spelling**

Despite the rise of text messaging, words should be spelled properly in business communication. Avoid the temptation to write:

*Nite*

*Thru*

*Pls*

## **26. Hyphens and dashes**

A hyphen is short ( - ) and is used to connect two words. There is no space on either side (*well-known*).

An en-dash ( – ) is longer. It is used to connect two numbers (55–95) to indicate a range. It, too, has no space on either side. Sometimes Word will turn a normal-size dash into something a great deal longer ( — ) but you can type one automatically by using control+minus.

An em-dash (—) is used to add emphasis to the next part of the sentence—like this. Like hyphens and en-dashes, it does not have a space on either side.

## **27. Wordiness**

Remove vague, over-used and wordy phrases. Your copy is not enhanced by such phrases as:

- *As a general rule*
- *With reference to*
- *On the basis of*
- *It is my understanding that*
- *It is understood that*
- *Research indicates that*
- *We refer to*
- *It can be considered.*

## **28. Strong verbs**

Replace weak and passive verbs with strong ones. *Do, get, have, does, has* and *put* should be all replaced with more descriptive words.

An example of a weak or non-descriptive verb is *walk*. Such alternatives as *stride, pace, march, perambulate, saunter, amble, stroll, strut, ramble, hike, and trek* give clearer meaning to your message.

## **29. Forget adverbs**

You find these little critters next to verbs. They mostly end in *-ly*. Examples: She looked *shrewdly* at him. He walked *slowly*. Your writing will improve if you eliminate them. Substitute them with a more expressive verb. Eg *She scrutinised him. He meandered.*

## **30. That, which**

Are these interchangeable? Unfortunately not and the difference between them is subtle.

*That* is defining or restrictive as in:

*The chair that is broken is in the shed.*

(Tells which one)

*Which* is non-defining and non-restrictive as in:

*The chair, which is broken, is in the shed.*

(Adds a fact about the only chair in question.)

Wherever possible eliminate *that* and *which*.

## **31. Eliminate extravagances**

Words like *very, in fact, little, pretty, rather, and totally* are, in fact, totally redundant. You don't need them. Your writing doesn't need them. Eliminate them and every word like them just taking up space yet adding nothing.

### 32. Less vs fewer

These mean the same but are used differently. Use less when the noun referring to a quantity (eg milk, rice), and fewer when referring to numbers (bottles of milk, grains of rice). This is why when you see a supermarket lane sign which reads *12 items or less*, it's wrong.

### 33. -ising words

There's a trend towards adding *-ize* or *-ise* to perfectly good verbs. Avoid this! Such abominations include *containerise*, *incentivise*, *prioritise* and others. Don't get confused though between nouns with *-ise* tacked on the end and such perfectly acceptable words as *fraternise*, *harmonise* and *fertilise*.

### 34. Unneeded extras

Keep *kind of* and *sort of* for their literal meaning:

*Chick pea is a kind of pulse.*

These two phrases are too informal for business writing and add unnecessary words.

### 35. It's all about me, me, me!

Do you use *I* or *me*? Most of us say *John and I*, rather than *John and me*, but that's wrong. It's me, me, me!

Here's a simple test to decide which one is right. *Me* is used both on its own (*My friend teased me*) and when others are involved (*My friend teased my brother and me*). Remove the others (*my brother*) to see if it needs changing. Now you've got *my friend teased I* and you know that isn't right. So leave it as *me*. This same technique works on he and him, she and her, they and them. For example, *Bob saw she and Jane at the shop*. Is it *she* or *her*? Does *Bob saw she* sound right to you? Not likely.

### 36. Its or it's?

Another common error. This time because it doesn't follow the usual rules of apostrophes. Even when *its* is used as a possessive (*the boat lost its mast*) it doesn't have an apostrophe. Unlike other possessives (*the boat's mast*). However, *it's* does follow the rule of contraction which states that when a letter is left out, an apostrophe goes in. (Think *shouldn't*, *mightn't*, *don't*.) When you mean *it is* but are using *it's* instead, there is an apostrophe.

### 37. Capitalisation

It is becoming increasingly common – but wrong – to capitalise words which are not names. Only names have a capital letter.

This includes, but is not restricted to, people (John), businesses (Coca-Cola), countries (New Zealand), cities and towns (Murchison), streets (Fort Street), entities (Albert Park), geographic names (Mount Ruapehu, Taranaki, Lake Taupo), publications (The New Zealand Herald, Company Vehicle) book titles (Lord of the Rings), movies (Pay it Forward), and reports (The Report on the Needless Capitalisation of Words). When used in the generic sense, nouns are not capitalised (committee, union, company). But if you say the Works Committee, it is a name and carries capitals. Job titles do not carry capitals (director, chief executive) unless they are abbreviated (CEO), or the title replaces Mr or Ms (Councillor John Brown, Mayor Jane Doe).

### 38. Bullet-proof lists

An effective method of listing items is to use bullet points. The most commonly used are • ▪ □ ◇. All work efficiently in whatever format you're writing. Avoid such bullets as 📌 or 🚫 which, while they may be clever, cute and relevant to your topic, may change to something else if you transmit your document electronically. Keep your bullets simple.

### 39. Short vs long bullets

If your bullets are a sentence fragment or only a few words, use a full stop only after the last one. If your bullets are full sentences, end each one with a full stop to avoid confusion. The eye is used to seeing a full stop at the end of sentences and by using it your reader will more readily understand your meaning.

#### **40. Eschew obfuscation**

Say what you mean. Avoid corporate gobbledegook like the plague. Phrases like *cover off*, *behavioural accountabilities*, *project facilitation*, *front of mind*, *frictional unemployment* and other similar forms of nonsense are not good business writing. You may know what you mean but if the point of your message is lost because your audience hasn't a clue what you're talking about, everyone's time is wasted.

#### **41. Subjects should agree with their verbs**

If your subject is singular (*cat*), your verb must be singular (*meows*), too. If there is more than one of your subject (*cats*), then your verb must be plural (*meow*). This can be confusing if there are a number of words between the subject and the object. *The flavour of tomatoes is heightened by the use of basil.*

A common mistake is made when using such phrases as *one of*. It seems as though the plural is correct when it is not. In addition, *a group*, *a couple* and *a family* are all singular.

It is becoming increasingly common to see a singular subject with a plural verb in order to avoid using the pronoun *he*. This is technically not correct. Instead of writing: *Put yourself in your prospect's shoes and consider whether he would like the language you use*, you could write: *Put yourself in your prospects' shoes and consider whether they would like the language you use.*

#### **42. Avoiding Americanisations**

Americans use 'z' instead of 's' in a wide range of words. *Organise*, *symbolise*, *fraternise* and other '-ise' words are often spelled with a 'z'. Because of the pervasiveness of Microsoft, it is now creeping into New Zealand writing. But you can change the default on your computer so this doesn't happen. Similarly, *program* often replaces *programme* but this is wrong too, except where the *program* being referred to is a *software program*. All other forms of *programme* are just that.

#### **43. Personalise your writing**

Most people hate being addressed as 'sir or madam' and thanks to databases, there's now no need for it. Use people's first names whenever appropriate, and their surnames when it's not.

#### **44. What's marital status got to do with it?**

Don't differentiate between Mrs, Miss or Ms when addressing women in business. It is sexist to do so. Why? Men aren't referred to by their marital status, so neither should women. Exception: If you are writing a personal letter to an older woman you know prefers to be addressed a certain way, by all means do so.

#### **45. The bar-stool technique**

People will respond best if you talk to them in a personal, friendly tone. Imagine they are sitting next to you in a bar or café. Write as if you were speaking to them. You don't use long or formal words in conversations, so don't use them in writing.

#### **46. Positive messages achieve better results**

If you have a negative message to communicate, do so in a positive way. You are more likely to get the result you are seeking. For example, instead of saying *Don't Run*, say *Please Walk*.

#### **47. State what is possible, not what is not**

Instead of saying what's not possible, say what is. Instead of saying what goals were not met, say what needs to be met. Instead of saying what someone can't have, say what they can. Keep away from such negatives as: *we can't*, *our policy doesn't permit* and *that's not possible*.

#### **48. Calls to action**

Every piece of business communication needs an action of some sort. What is it you want your reader to do:

- Remember something?
- Do something?
- Go somewhere?
- Arrange something?

- Tell someone?

This is your call to action and it should be clearly stated. Don't expect people to work out for themselves what you want them to do. Tell them.

#### **49. The right word for the right context**

Using words out of context causes confusion. For instance, *the policeman committed an act of bravery* is an odd use of *committed*. Robberies and other crimes are *committed* so it has a negative connotation in readers' minds. Using such a phrase will cause your reader to stumble over your writing and possibly become confused. Check the meanings of your words.

#### **50. Unintentional puns can be painful**

Business writing is not an appropriate forum for puns, intentional or unintentional.

*Dracula knew there was a lot at stake.*

Double-check that your words do not have double-meanings which could change your message.

#### **51. Keep subjects and verbs close**

Readers become confused when too many words separate the subject of a sentence and its verb. *Sales managers typically, when approached by a client, want to engage in pleasantries.*

A better sentence would be: *Sales managers typically want to engage in pleasantries when approached by a client.*

#### **52. The art of persuasion**

If your intention is to persuade your reader to take some action, you will need to state solid reasons why they should do as you ask. List the benefits or rewards they will receive by acceding to your request. This is generally more effective than making threats about what will happen if they don't.

#### **53. Move from the general to the specific**

A generalisation is a topic or umbrella sentence which is usually followed by specifics. A strong paragraph will start with a generalisation, then move on to an explanation.

*Our newly enhanced Global Assist Hotline now offers a wider array of safety and security features (General). In addition to 24-hour ... (specific). We will also help you ... (specific). And, what's more we'll ... (specific).*

#### **54. Speaking personally**

Addressing the reader as "you" allows the writer to sound more personal and, at the same time eliminate the highly impersonal passive voice. Instead of *Good hotel recommendations are to be found at the tourist office* write *You will find good hotel recommendations at the tourist office.*

#### **55. Speaking is not the same as writing**

The words we use when talking with people are not always appropriate in business writing. Addressing someone as *mate*, for instance, is a no-no unless they are a personal friend. Swear words are another. While now routinely part of our everyday conversation, swear words should never be used in business writing no matter what the provocation.

#### **56. Foreign phrases**

Using foreign phrases – *annus horribilus, per diem, corrigenda, à point, ad valorem, bête noire* etc – should not be used in general business writing. They serve only to confuse the reader and demonstrate superiority. Exceptions are words which are now so commonly used we no longer think of them as foreign. *Ad infinitum, alter ego, entrepreneur, bonhomie, per capita, quid pro quo, Mardi gras, hoi polloi* etc.

#### **57. Constructive criticism**

No-one enjoys having their work criticised. It is, however, how we learn and improve.

When someone suggests ways to improve your writing, put aside your ego and take their ideas on board. Your writing will be the better for it.

### **58. Avoid clichés like the plague**

Cliché-ridden writing is lazy writing and has no place in business documents. Phrases like *at the end of the day*, *like the plague*, *win-win*, *do not hesitate to contact the undersigned*, and many others are so over-used that their impact has been eroded. Check your writing carefully for clichés and hackneyed phrases, and replace them with something more meaningful and original.

### **59. Being certain is a definite possibility**

Sometimes you want someone to do something. Other times they must do it. Be clear which is which.

*Must* expresses requirements that have a definite need.

*The plan must be in place by January 31.*

*May* or *can* indicates a certain amount of choice.

*The company may allow employees to take part in the event.*

*Should* indicates a strong preference for a particular action.

*All staff should take their breaks at the specified time.*

### **60. Avoid ambiguity**

Make your meaning clear. Saying *the driver managed to escape from the vehicle before it sank and swam to the bank* is nonsense. As is, *the prisoner said the judge is mad*. These sentences would make sense simply by the addition of an appropriately-placed comma. Other examples: *Attention, passengers for flight 234. When boarding is announced, it will be through gate nine.* *During the assault, the thieves used knives and two guns. They were later found on the river-bank.*

### **61. Readable visual aids**

When using such visual aids as PowerPoint, be sure the accompanying text is both readable and correct. A great presentation loses its effectiveness if the text is too small to be read from all parts of the room. Also, check that the words in headings are all spelled correctly, are grammatically correct and formatted properly.

### **62. Projecting the right image**

Your credibility can be affected by the style and tone of your writing. That's because they give clues about your personality, your ability and your confidence in yourself. Make a good impression by ensuring your writing is the best it can possibly be.

### **63. Writing to inform rather than impress**

Focus on the reader and don't try to impress them with your vast knowledge or show you are up-to-date with the latest buzzwords. This alienates people. Instead, write so that your message will be clearly understood by your intended audience.

Any of these phrases will irritate rather than impress your reader:

*Being proactive*

*Arrive at decisions*

*Optimise results*

*Attain ceilings*

*Step up processes*

*Prioritise anything*

*Engage with* (rather than *talk to*)

*Have marketing activities that impact on business* (rather than *have an impact on it*)

*Find solutions on a countrywide scale*

*Touch base with*

### **64. Read widely**

The best writers read widely. Doing so increases their knowledge, provides them with the appropriate vocabulary and allows them to see how other writers write effectively. The best sources of information are newspapers, magazines and books. Not television. Being well-read will make you feel more confident about how you write and better able to relate information or express opinions in an informed manner.

## 65. Possessives

People commonly make these three errors when using possessives:

- Putting an apostrophe in the wrong place.  
*Mens', womens', childrens'* instead of *men's, women's, children's*
- Forgetting the apostrophe entirely.  
*Mens, womens, childrens* instead of *men's, women's, children's*
- Putting one where it is not needed.  
*Our's is not to reason why.*

Possessive pronouns (*his, hers, ours, theirs* etc) do not have an apostrophe.

## 66. The demise of the semi-colon

The semi-colon ( ; ) is not used as frequently as it once was. It divides two clauses that are linked by sense but not a conjunction (*but, and* etc).

*He knew it was late; the front light had been turned off.*

There are two alternatives:

- Write two short sentences  
*(He knew it was late. The front light had been turned off.)*
- Add a conjunction  
*(He knew it was late because the front light had been turned off.)*

## 67. Question marks

Direct questions always take a question mark.

*(What is going on?)*

Indirect questions do not have a question mark.

*(I would like to know what is going on.)*

If you are unsure about whether to use a question mark, rewrite the sentence so it is indirect and therefore unnecessary.

## 68. Eliminate verb phrases and gerunds

Such verb phrases as *to come to* and *to reach a conclusion* are best replaced with a single verb: *come, conclude*.

Gerunds are verbs ending with *-ing* that are used as nouns. These, too, should be avoided.

Instead of: *Management has control over production*

Use: *Management controls production*

Instead of: *The Romans were victorious over the Huns*

Use: *The Romans defeated the Huns*

Instead of: *Maintaining profits*

Use: *Profits are maintained*

## 69. Where the passive is acceptable

Use passive verbs to stress *what* rather than *how*.

Instead of: *Human resources initiatives improved employee retention*

Use: *Employee retention was improved by human resources initiatives*

Passive verbs are sometimes preferred in cases where it is important to emphasise what is happening.

## 70. Outdated words and phrases

Times have changed and business communication has moved on. Eliminate from your writing these tired old expressions:

*ASAP*

*In the near future*

*Attached please find*

*I would like to thank you*

*Just to thank you*

*Thanking you in advance*

*Acknowledge receipt of*

*As per your request*

*Please feel free to call*

*Please do not hesitate to call*

*Needless to say*  
*It is evident that*  
*As far as I know*  
*Obviously*  
*More than happy to*  
*As I'm sure you know*  
*Honestly*  
*In all honesty*  
*It goes without saying*  
*May I take this opportunity to*  
*Permit me to say*  
*This is to inform you*  
*To tell the truth*

There are many different ways to rephrase these tired, boring and outdated phrases. Use your imagination by writing as you would speak.

### **71. Only changing your meaning**

Putting *only* in the wrong place can alter your meaning. Consider the different meaning of these sentences:

*Sue only wrote the report*  
*Only Sue wrote the report*  
*Sue wrote only the report*

Take care to put *only* immediately before the word you're talking about.

### **72. White space is important**

The layout of a document has a bearing on its readability. Make sure there is plenty of white space so that the text does not look dense and off-putting. The aim is to make it easy to read. Bullet points are an excellent way to break up text and highlight important points.

### **73. Too many typefaces can be messy**

To avoid your document looking untidy, chose a maximum of two fonts or typefaces – one for the headings and one for the text.

Headings can be sans-serif (like this font) but text is most easily read in a serif font (like this, which is Times Roman and common in newspapers).

### **74. Visual readability**

Underlining and all-caps can be very hard to read. Emphasise, using italics or bold. Use initial capital letters for proper nouns (names), otherwise use as few capitals as possible. The general rule is: if in doubt, use lower case.

### **75. Familiarity breeds mistakes**

Emails tend to be quite informal, which often makes them wordy. Always check before you send, to see if you can delete excess words while still making your meaning clear. It's important to write as you speak, but don't overdo it and add in unimportant details which are time-consuming to read, and add nothing to your message.

### **76. Exclamation marks**

Do not over-use exclamation marks! They are usually unnecessary and merely render your writing more difficult to read. Replace exclamation marks with words or phrases which convey your meaning.

### **77. The two sides to brackets**

There are always two parts to brackets – an opening and a closing bracket. Ensure you don't forget the closing one, particularly if it's a good distance from your opening one.

### **78. Italicising titles**

The titles of books, magazines, TV shows, movies and newspapers etc are commonly written in italics. As in *Six Feet Under*, *Lord of the Rings* etc.

### **79. Naming inconsistencies**

Check that your use of names is consistent. If you refer to someone as Mrs, you must also refer to males as Mr. It is not appropriate to say *Mrs Parker wrote to Bill Brown*.

Wherever possible it is best to steer clear of such honorifics. Exceptions are doctors (*Dr*), professors (*Prof*), ministers (*Rev*), politicians (*Hon* or *Rt Hon*), or members of the armed forces (their rank).

### **80. Check, check and check again**

You can never check your document too many times. Errors hide where you least expect them – particularly in headlines. Triple-check your work. The eye sees what it expects to see, not what is actually written.

### **81. The best way to error-check**

The two most effective methods of checking your work for mistakes are:

- Read it aloud
- Have a colleague read it aloud while you read the text.

### **82. Avoiding procrastination**

If you have a large writing project to tackle, break it down into smaller components and tackle them one by one. That way you will actually begin, rather than continually putting it off. List each element of the project and cross them off as you complete them. You will then feel as if you're making progress and this will keep you on track. If you work this way you'll be more likely to do a little each day rather than putting it off until the deadline is too close for you to do a good job.

### **83. Rules are (sometimes) made to be broken**

Language changes constantly and the challenge for business writers is to know which of the traditional conventions to discard as obsolete, and which to continue. For example, we have been taught not to split infinitives as in *she decided to never touch another cigarette* or *she planned to gradually get rid of her teddy bears*. *To never touch* and *to gradually get rid of* are split infinitives. The verbs *to touch* and *to get rid of*, both have intervening words, *never* and *gradually*. However, it is perfectly permissible today to split infinitives in this way.

### **84. Constructive instructions**

Instructions fail in their purpose if they are confusing, make the reader angry or fail to motivate the reader to action. Effective instructions always:

- Explain **why** you want something done
- Explain **how** you want it done
- Say **when** it needs to be done
- Define **success** and **failure**
- Define an **end result**.

### **85. The power of the written word**

Many writers do not sufficiently appreciate the tremendous power of the written word. Words that are harmless in face-to-face interaction, can have an altogether more chilling effect in writing. That's because the main elements present in body language (stance, facial expression, tone of voice, gestures etc) are missing in written communication. All that is left is words. For example, laughing with a colleague while telling them they really messed up, touching their shoulder and generally softening yours words is unlikely to cause offence. Write the words, *you messed up*, however, and you can expect an angry response.

### **86. Filler words**

Try not to use words that don't add to the meaning of what you're trying to say. Many words are just fillers. Examples include just, actually, really. Before you send or distribute what you've written, check it for unneeded words.

### **87. Leave the editing till you're finished**

Don't try to edit your copy as you write. Get all your ideas down on paper first, then go back and see if you've been clear and concise. It's highly likely your work will need considerable

reworking. Don't think this is wrong. Even novelists like Stephen King rewrite their work a number of times before they consider it finished.

### **88. Link words make your writing flow**

Use transitions – also known as linking words – to tie various parts of paragraphs together. 'So' is one of these linking words. 'And' is another. Don't worry that it may look or be ungrammatical. In fact, the difference it will make to your phrasing will work wonders. Here is a list of link words you can use to tie your sentences together:

*In effect*  
*Since*  
*In other words*  
*In the same way*  
*Therefore*  
*Despite*  
*In fact*  
*Now that*  
*On the other hand*  
*Finally*  
*In addition to*  
*Once again*  
*Now that*  
*Of course*  
*Here*  
*And*  
*Or*  
*As well*  
*Immediately*

### **89. Using bullets properly**

This is how you should use bullets:

- Always line up the bullet with the preceding paragraph.
- Make sure that if it goes onto two lines, the second line is indented by the same amount.
- Never use tabs to indent bullets.
- End the introductory sentence with a colon.
- If the bullet is a whole sentence, begin it with a capital and end it with a full-stop. Otherwise begin with a lower case and have no punctuation at the end. The last point always ends with a full-stop.
- Make sure each point uses the same sentence structure. For example, if the first bullet starts with a verb such as "applying", the next should start with a verb, too.

### **90. Little words make a huge difference**

The addition of a tiny word can completely change the meaning of a sentence. Take "*the*" for instance. If you were to say "*boys were playing in the yard*", your reader would take that to mean a group of non-specific boys were playing in the yard. But, if you were to say "***the** boys were playing in the yard*", the reader is alerted to the fact that a particular group of boys are doing the playing. It moves from the general to the specific. Be careful with those little words, they can make your meaning more confusing if you put the wrong one in the wrong place.

### **91. Reaching your audience**

The one word (well, two actually) to which we pay more attention than anything else is our name. Use a person's name and your copy is much more likely to be read. This is particularly important when writing a sales document. The next most interesting words to readers are:

**you – your – yours**

### **92. Starting sentences with *and* and *but***

Can you start a sentence with *and* or *but*? Yes, you can, but the question is: should you? In most cases, no. Business writing usually requires a degree of formality not found in more colloquial writing styles. The exception, of course, is email which is usually less formal.

**93. Features vs benefits**

If the purpose of your document is to sell a service, product or idea, enumerate the benefits rather than merely list the features. If your reader can see how what you are selling will benefit them, they will be more inclined to accept your offer.

**94. Make your writing interesting**

No-one likes being bored so make your writing as interesting as you possibly can. That way you have a much greater chance of people making it to the end of your document, and taking whatever action it is you want them to. Bored people switch off.

**95. Risk-taking**

If you are unsure about something you have written, it is best not to risk it being wrong. If at all possible, check. If not, delete it or change the wording to something you do know is right.